

Evaluating preparedness can be difficult. Your institution likely has key components in place, or your leadership team may have already grappled with—and survived!—some challenging issues. However, we would caution against being overly optimistic. It is not uncommon to overestimate a leadership team’s resilience and capability. A single slow, uncoordinated, poorly conceived, or insensitive response is all it takes to shatter stakeholder trust in the ability of your college or university, and by default your leadership team, to manage not just the crisis but the institution itself.

## CRITICAL COMPONENTS:

As with every other area of an institution’s strategy and mission, without a clear, overarching understanding of goals and objectives it is impossible to empirically evaluate capability and/or success. This equally applies to efforts to manage and reduce reputational risk.

### PLAN VIABILITY

Colleges and universities frequently rely on instinct and experience rather than—if they even exist!— documented plans. But in a crisis, the easy things are hard, and the hard things, impossible. Customized plans—tailored to your institution and team—based on best practices provide the necessary support to navigate challenging situations effectively.

### TRAINING & AWARENESS

Regular training and exercises build strategic and operational preparedness across the institution. They increase team cohesion, improve individual understanding, validate written procedures, and ensure your school is genuinely crisis-ready.

### RISK SENSING

Early detection tools allow an institution to identify emerging issues before they escalate into full-blown crises. This proactive approach buys your school critical time to map a different strategy, minimizing the reputational damage of slow-moving, corrosive risks.

### GOVERNANCE

Effectively managing reputational risk must be a cross-functional, institutional priority driven by clear goals, supporting metrics, defined accountability, and dedicated resources. Unfortunately, wishing it doesn’t make it so.

## 5 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR TEAM

1. Beyond emergency response, what plans are in place and how useful are they?
2. When was the last time we participated in an exercise that was not about a physical event but reputational risk e.g. academic freedom, racial justice, protests, or an admissions, sports, financial, or accreditation scandal?
3. Do we have a culture in which “bad news” is proactively shared and escalated?
4. Do we have a defined process to identify, prioritize and proactively manage the top 5 issues facing our institution in the year ahead?
5. Who does/should “own” managing reputational risk?

# REPUTATIONAL RISK MANAGEMENT MATURITY MODEL



More than the underlying event or issue itself, it is the response that has the single biggest impact on the viability and reputation of the organization. **How does your institution score?**

	1 INITIAL	2 INCONSISTENT	3 DEFINED	4 PROACTIVELY MANAGED	5 OPTIMIZED
PLAN VIABILITY	Basic Clery Act & Emergency Response Plans, crisis response undocumented, ad hoc	“Paper” plans for Crisis Communications or Crisis Management Siloed response	Clear, aligned Crisis Management, Communications & Emergency Plans	Integrated planning; response capability understood & aligned	<b>Reputational Risk Management embedded as part of organizational culture:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• driver of preparedness, strategy, and decision-making</li> <li>• enables rapid understanding of complex problems</li> <li>• innovative, provides competitive edge</li> <li>• fully aligned teams, a true “capability”</li> <li>• recognized by Board as being critical to stewardship</li> </ul>
TRAINING & AWARENESS	Isolated awareness	Limited awareness of plans, responsibilities; Inconsistently used and/or tested	Predictable training cycle with focus on increasing familiarity and capability	High familiarity, teams tested in challenging, realistic scenarios	
RISK SENSING	Limited risk-specific reporting procedures (i.e. ethics “hotline,” Title IX)	Reactive, informal incident reporting/ escalation procedures in place	Reporting & screening process established Preliminary issues identification & management	Key Risk Indicators actively used, culture supports sharing “bad news”	
GOVERNANCE	No clear ownership	Compliance driven project-based budget	Accountability, policies defining expectations, allocated budget	Managed program with accompanying goals/ metrics supported by appropriate budget	
MATURITY	➔				